

Twenty years ago, when Maurice Ashley was 14 and living in Brownsville, Brooklyn, he was soundly defeated in an offhand game of chess. Embarrassed and angry, he dug up a paperback on the game, intending to brush up, to learn a trick or two. Instead, he fell deeply in love.

The book was about Paul Morphy, a 19th-century Louisianian who was America's first great player. "I was stunned," he said yesterday. "There were such dazzling plays."

Ever since that first glimpse of the vastness and intriguing possibilities of chess, Ashley, an immigrant from Jamaica, has focused his life on the game. On Monday, he reached the pinnacle of his passion: he became the latest of the world's 470 grandmasters, and the first black person to reach the game's highest rank.

Since that first epiphany, Ashley's life has been centered on chess: playing it, studying it, coaching it and training for it. As a student at Brooklyn Technical High School, he joined the Black Bear School of Chess, a loosely defined group of young African-American chess fanatics in Brooklyn.



Maurice Ashley, World's First Black Grandmaster

The young men, who were mostly in their late teens or early 20's, would gather on Friday nights for "chess rumbles."

"We were fighters, gladiators," Ashley said. "You couldn't enter this group without being ready to go to war. Nobody would leave until Sunday. They'd shower, sleep a little, and get up and play. Many a girlfriend was lost over weekend chess rumbles."



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Despite an inability to play chess, Ashley's girlfriend, Michele, hung on and became his wife. They have a 4-year-old daughter, Nia, who does play. They live in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

In the clubby, eccentric world of chess, Ashley is known for his straightforwardness, clarity and determined playing style, said Allen Kaufman, executive director of Chess-in-the-Schools, a nonprofit organization that provides expert players to teach chess in schools in low-income neighborhoods in the New York metropolitan area.

Ashley attained the rank of grandmaster on Monday as a result of his play in a tournament sponsored by the Manhattan Chess Club. The rank is conferred by the International Chess Federation to players who amass a set number of points in 24 official games played within a seven-year period, said Eric C. Johnson, assistant director of the United States Chess Federation.

Of the 85,000 members of the United States Chess Federation, 45 are grandmasters, including 10 in the New York City area, Johnson said.

Before winning his last points Monday, Ashley's rank was international master, one step below grandmaster.

From 1991 to 1997, Ashley was the chess director of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund, at which he led teams, including one known as the Dark Knights of Mott Hall, to three national championships. Three players on the teams won individual championships in their age groups.

"I fell in love with coaching," Ashley said. "I fell in love with the kids."

But two years ago, he stepped out of coaching to devote all his time and attention to his dream. "I was very frustrated," he said. "My life's dream was to become a grandmaster, and my dream was on hold."

He adopted a training routine as rigorous as a prizefighter's. He worked with a coach and spent hours every day playing and studying, and attacking his weaknesses, including what he said was a tendency to drift a bit.

There was the added weight of trying to become the first black grandmaster. "It was enormous pressure," he said. "I could not go to a chess tournament without hearing the question, 'Where are you going to do it?' So many people wanted this to happen to me."

During the game he won that propelled him to grandmaster status, his opponent moved a rook to attack Ashley's rook, a misstep that allowed Ashley to move his bishop to attack his opponent's queen. When he saw his opponent's mistake, Ashley said, he froze. Before him was grandmastership, his life's goal. What if, in his terror, he dropped his bishop?

Since his triumph, he has had a chance to reflect on his achievement as the first black grandmaster.

"It makes it much sweeter," he said. "It's not significant to me to be the best black chess player in the world. But it is sweet to be the first."

What now? "I have no idea," he said. "I'm still a beginner, as far as I'm concerned. There's so much to learn. The game is still fresh for me."